

The American Veteran, Edition 7, Part 3

Jim Benson, host: Recently we had an opportunity to meet Charles Yinger, a very special veteran who embodies the spirit and experience of "The Greatest Generation."

Charles Yinger, World War II veteran: It was during the depression in July of 1936. For a young guy there was no work. So I decided that I would like to go into the service. I told them I was not quite 18, but I was only 16 and a half years old. I got assigned to the 3rd Cavalry, in a machine gun troop at Fort Meyer. At that time George S. Patton was a Commanding Officer, and I got assigned to walk the Tomb. To walk the Tomb you had to be very well groomed, you had to be soldierly. I was on duty in the back of the amphitheater when President Roosevelt and King George put a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. We were always told that one chip out of that Tomb would be ruined for life and they wanted that protected and that is why we were walking the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Benson: Yinger moved on to the 14th infantry. He was guarding ships in the Panama Canal when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Yinger: News come over the ship's radio and so forth, and they passed on to us what they possible could. When we got back to Gatun (Panama), we knew what to expect then, they already attacked.

Benson: In 1942 President Roosevelt himself asked for volunteers for a very dangerous mission. Brigadier General Frank Merrill had orders to open a Chinese front to Japan. Staff Sergeant Yinger signed up for Merrill's Marauders.

Yinger: When President Roosevelt asked for volunteers, that was my apple pie. If he asked for something, I wanted to do it, because, I figured, he had done plenty for us. We went all the way up to Walawbum (Burma) on the Ledo Road. That is when we hit the Japs from there on in.

I never forget the general at the first scrimmage that we had with the Japs. We were on the trail, and the general comes back and one guy says to him "General, I thought the United States Army never retreats." He said, "Son, we are not retreating we are just withdrawing for a better position." We put on a pretty nice size forced march to get over this one mountain, which in other words when we got over this mountain, you could actually see right down on the airfield.

The main objective of taking Myitkyina (Burma) was the purpose of having access to the landing strip for our planes, for supply to china.

It was about 7:30 in the morning but the attack wasn't supposed to start until they gave orders to attack. Anyway these four Japanese walked right straight into this

groups of guys and, well, they opened up. When they opened up, that is when the fireworks started.

That late afternoon, we crossed the airfield, they must have withdrawn because they thought there was more of us than what they anticipated.

Unidentified voice: Over the air went 2 words: "Cafeteria Lunch," the code signal indicating that Myitkyina airbase was in allied hands.

Yinger: We were lucky to get out of that period, but we made out real good. After that was secured over there they gave orders for the old guys, and I was one of the oldest, to get ready because you were going to be flying out tomorrow. So we got ready to come home. I enjoyed every bit of it because when you work with such great people and leaders, I mean, what do you say. I enjoyed it, I enjoyed the military.

Benson: A celebration marking the 60th anniversary of the end of World War Two will be held on September 2nd at the World War Two Memorial in Washington, DC. Up next: Our kickoff celebration of VA's seventy-five years of service. The Department of Veterans Affairs celebrates its 75th anniversary this year. This month we take a look at the highlights from the VA Diamond Jubilee kickoff at Constitution Hall in Washington, DC.

Ceremony Announcer: Ladies and Gentlemen: Please welcome to the podium your master of ceremonies, Vietnam veteran and the man behind the movie "Good Morning Vietnam," Adrian Cronauer.

Cronauer: Thank you, thank you ladies and gentleman, distinguished guests and American veterans. Welcome to Constitution Hall here in Washington for the opening of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Jubilee. It is my pleasure and my privilege to be your master of ceremonies for this morning's event in which we salute America's veterans and we begin the year-long observance of the 75th Anniversary of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs R. James Nicholson: Ladies and Gentlemen: It is a privilege to share this stage with heroes whose service has made it possible for us to enjoy the freedom to be here. Today President Hoover's vision is realized by VA's scale as the second largest federal agency in our government. In 1930 the VA was serving a few hundred thousand veterans. Now, 75 years later, it serves over 5.2 million veterans in our 157 hospitals and 850 clinics.

Vice President Dick Cheney: Each morning, many VA hospital employees arriving at work pass by a sign that reads "The price of freedom is visible here." And you can be proud of your association with a vital agency of the United States Government. Thank you very much.

Cronauer: There is an old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. Some of those stirring images are captured here in this very special video production.

(Video depicting military service members returning home from overseas.)

Fred Downs, director of VA Prosthetics and Sensory Aids Service: We're always going to have soldiers and that means we'll have veterans and that means we just keep on going. And so what we need to do is concentrate on how we can best serve those people.

Veteran: Just the fact that the VA was here. To me that was the only place that I felt like I could get help. This is where I got my life back.

Matt Bristol, Gulf War veteran: VA is there throughout your life and even in death to honor you for your service to the country. I feel fortunate to have that with me.

Bob Dole, World War Two veteran and former United States Senator: The VA is there and they care. And that's important.

Secretary Nicholson: There is no other country in that world that has anything that comes close to what we do for our veterans in the United States. Thank you for being partners in our noble mission and thank you for being part of VA's Diamond Jubilee. Thank you and God Bless You.

Benson: To learn more about the history of the Department of Veterans Affairs, check out our website at 75anniversary.va.gov

That takes care of another edition of The American Veteran.

It is our honor to bring you these stories each month. If you would like to contact the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding our show or for any other reason, Here are a few ways to do so: By phone, call 1-800-827-1000, on the Internet, visit www.va.gov

For the Department of Veterans Affairs, I'm Jim Benson. See you next time.

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